THE LIONS

He was a man whose dreams refused to behave. On generous nights they merely unsettled him. On others they filed paperwork, hired attorneys, and attempted to ruin his week. That particular night, they rewrote literature. He dreamt that The Old Man and the Sea contained a hidden murder subplot. Not metaphorical murder. Not symbolic. Actual, jurisdictionally prosecutable homicide. In the dream-version, everything proceeded as usual. Santiago fished. The marlin bled nobly. The sharks arrived like auditors. The prose remained lean, stoic, sunburnt. But after Santiago dreams about the lions on the African beaches—those golden, impossible lions—there was a footnote. Not a literary footnote. A confession. The boy was not just devoted. The sea was not just indifferent. The lions were not just memory. Someone had died. And at the very last page—after the famous quiet ending—a single additional paragraph appeared. A revelation. A name. A motive buried in the currents. The entire novella, it turned out, was a crime scene wearing sunscreen. In his dream, he—our protagonist—knew

this. He alone had deciphered it. He had traced the patterns in the repetition, the suspicious absence of witnesses, the way the sharks came too conveniently. He had found the anomaly in the lions. So he arranged a public reading. A solemn literary event in a hall that smelled of old wood and academic resentment. Scholars gathered. Critics adjusted their scarves with predatory interest. Someone in the back whispered "minimalism" like it was a threat. He stood at the podium with marked-up pages. He would expose her. Because yes—there was a culprit. A woman. Not named in the text. Not visible. But there. Always there. Between the lines like salt. He would unmask her. He turned to the final page. Cleared his throat. The audience leaned in. He read the lions passage. Silence. He waited for the additional paragraph to appear. It did not. He flipped the page. Nothing. He checked his annotations. Blank. He searched the margins for the confession. Gone. The audience stared. One scholar coughed. Another smiled the way sharks do. He tried to explain. There was a woman. A murder. A hidden narrative. It was

right after the lions. They blinked at him as if he had accused punctuation of conspiracy. And the worst part— She never showed up. In the dream, she was supposed to be there. To sit in the third row. To smile knowingly. To rise when accused. To confirm it all. But the third row was empty. He woke with the peculiar humiliation of a man who had lost an argument in a courtroom that does not exist. And the problem with his dreams was not that they were frightening. It was that they expected follow-through. And now he sat enthroned in porcelain sovereignty, dignity dissolved, empire fallen. The bathroom light hummed with bureaucratic indifference. The tiles were cold. The air carried the unmistakable authority of consequences. He bit into the toilet paper roll like a man gnawing on driftwood in a shipwreck. The long, long, long watery catastrophe continued its monologue beneath him. A monsoon with opinions. Peposo dell'Impruneta had seemed heroic at the time. Pepper upon pepper upon pepper, braised in wine like a Florentine dare. Laid arrogantly over polenta concia—cheese, butter, more

pepper—an edible act of escalation. It had tasted magnificent. Apocalyptic, but magnificent. His uncle had warned him, years ago, over a table equally reckless. "I adore pepper," the old man had said, raising a fork like a prophet of spice, "but it lights candles under my asshole." Wisdom rarely survives youth. And so now, in the chapel of plumbing, he prayed.

"*Pulchra filia amoris*," he whispered between waves.

"Pulchra filia amoris,
Servus sum illecebrarum tuarum;
Uno tantum verbo potes
Poenas meas consolari."

Beautiful daughter of love. I am the slave of your charms. With one word you can soothe my pains. He was not entirely sure who he was addressing. The woman from the missing murder subplot? The absent culprit of literature? A goddess of gastrointestinal mercy? The abstract concept of dairy restraint? Another tremor. Another liquid reckoning. He considered the structural similarities between his

current condition and Santiago's ordeal at sea. Man versus nature. Endurance. Salt. Regret. He had thought the lions symbolized memory. Now he suspected they symbolized warning. He closed his eyes and imagined the reading again. The podium. The silent crowd. The empty third row. Perhaps she had never shown up because she knew. She knew about the pepper. He groaned, half prayer, half negotiation. If he survived this, he would renounce excess. He would respect balance. He would treat seasoning as suggestion, not manifesto. A final, seismic conclusion passed. Silence. The bathroom hummed. He sat there, pale but victorious, like a general after an unnecessarily spicy war. Dreams could accuse him. Literature could betray him. Women could vanish from the third row of imaginary auditoriums. But tonight, he had faced a more ancient adversary. And he had lived. He returned to the dining room like a veteran of a private war. Not walking. Negotiating gravity. The maître d'hôtel—guardian of reservations, diplomat of seating arrangements, emperor of folded napkins—now

slightly bent, slightly pale, carrying within him the ghost of imprudent pepper. The chandeliers glowed with bourgeois serenity. Cutlery chimed. A couple argued softly over tannins. Somewhere, a fork met porcelain with the confidence of someone who had not recently reconsidered their life choices. He crossed the room with ceremonial stiffness. No one must suspect. He reached the liquor cart. A silver shrine on wheels. Without asking permission—from management, from etiquette, from heaven—he seized the bottle of Scotch. Not a delicate pour. Not a refined gesture. He filled the tumbler to a level normally reserved for divorce. The room noticed. He raised the glass with the solemnity of a pagan priest and swallowed it in one uninterrupted descent. No ice. No pause. A vertical act of survival. Then, trembling slightly—not from emotion, but from internal aftershocks—he began to chant.

"Libemus, libemus e laetis calicibus,
quos pulchritudo coronat;
Et hora fugax, fugax ipsa, voluptate inebrietur.
Libemus in dulcibus tremoribus quos amor suscitat,

Quoniam ille oculus ad cor omnipotens tendit."

Let us drink from the joyful cups crowned by beauty. Let the fleeting hour, fleeting itself, be drunk with pleasure. Let us drink in the sweet tremors love awakens, For that eye moves omnipotent toward the heart. The customers stared. A woman froze mid–soup spoon. A businessman lowered his phone. An elderly couple nodded, unsure but supportive of Latin. His voice shook, yes—but it carried. For a moment, the restaurant was no longer a restaurant. It was a coliseum of digestion and destiny. The maître d'hôtel stood there, Scotch blazing through his veins like disinfectant for regret. He set the empty tumbler down with finality. A waiter approached cautiously.

"Sir… are you quite well?"

He straightened. Smoothed his jacket. Reassembled civilization across his shoulders.

“I am,” he said softly. “Seating for four at nineteen thirty. The window, as requested.”

And he resumed his rounds. Only now, beneath the linen and crystal and cultivated calm, there pulsed something new. Not merely indigestion. Not merely literature. But the suspicion that life, like pepper, must be handled with both reverence and distance. And that sometimes, when the lions do not appear, one must drink anyway. And then the door opened. Not dramatically. Not with wind. Just the discreet, well-oiled hinge of inevitability. In came the regular. The one who knew. This was a street-level restaurant. Windows were theatrical devices for amateurs. Never choose a table by the glass. You did not curate a truffle soup, you did not commission a tournedos Rossini, only to have it visually audited by pedestrians carrying plastic bags and existential crumbs. The maître saw him and—despite recent geological instability in his lower hemisphere—smiled. Not a service smile. A conspiratorial one. The kind an antique bookshop keeper wears when he has

just received an autographed copy of The Sound and the Fury and spots his most devoted bookworm entering through the door, eyes already scanning the shelves for salvation. The regular removed his gloves with slow precision. He did not glance at the window tables. He never did. He walked past them as one walks past tourist traps in cities one owns internally. They locked eyes. A nod. No words needed. Words were for the undecided. The maître approached with a limp disguised as gravitas.

"Your usual," he murmured. The regular inclined his head. "Some things must remain interior."

Of course. They moved together toward the back of the room, toward the tables that could not be seen from the street, where sauces were safe from proletarian gaze and wine decanted in moral privacy. The maître pulled the chair with ceremonial care. For a brief second—just a flicker—he wondered whether this man had been in the third row of that impossible reading. Whether he had known about the missing

paragraph. Whether he, too, had sensed the hidden murder after the lions. The regular sat.

“Pepper tonight?” he asked casually.

The maître paused. Just half a heartbeat.

“Moderately,” he said. “We are entering an era of restraint.”

The regular smiled the smile of a man who has read the margins of life. Outside, a pedestrian slowed, trying to peer in. Inside, civilization adjusted the curtains. The maître entrusted the man to one of his best waiters—a tall creature of posture and predatory elegance, trained in the sacred arts of timing and silence. The order was delivered in a voice low and controlled.

“Croutons de foie gras. Truffle soup en croûte. Volaille en vessie. Château La Tour, 1982.”

The waiter did not gasp. He illuminated. His eyes brightened with the electric recognition of

extravagance—the same sudden, professional alertness that appears when someone requests not merely indulgence, but discernment. This was not appetite. This was curation. There are orders that feed you. And there are orders that confirm your worth. This was the latter. A faint tremor of admiration crossed his face. Not vulgar. Not surprised. Just the acknowledgment of a rare alignment: wealth meeting knowledge. In an era of lemonades served with seafood, of grated cheese scattered indiscriminately over marine creatures, of substitutions and dietary apologies—this man had chosen correctly. Decisively. Without consulting the menu like a tourist deciphering a map. The waiter bowed—not theatrically, but with the subtle geometry of respect—and withdrew. He did not turn his back fully. There are gestures reserved for wisdom. He moved toward the kitchen with something like proskynesis in his spine, bearing the order as one carries a sealed decree. In the dining room, the regular unfolded his napkin with calm assurance. The maître observed from a distance.

Outside, a pedestrian paused again at the window, trying to glimpse what civilization looks like when it is properly ordered. Inside, a 1982 Bordeaux prepared to be remembered. The maître, still faintly scorched by memory and Scotch, was guiding a woman of architectural elegance toward her chair when the words drifted through the air: "Croutons de foie gras… Truffle soup en croûte… Volaille en vessie… Château La Tour, 1982." He felt her spine adjust. She did not turn her head. She did not betray curiosity. But the temperature shifted. Civilization sensed a rival. She sat. Folded her napkin. Waited. Her waiter arrived—competent, ambitious, perfectly aware of the other table's seismic order. She spoke calmly, without consulting the menu.

"Huitres Gillardeau. Fumet de crustacés. Lotte de mer de Méditerranée en papillote. Crémant d'Alsace Brut, 2018."

Silence. Her waiter's pupils dilated—not with vulgar excitement, but with professional reverence. The oysters alone were a declaration. The fumet:

deliberate. The monkfish en papillote: confident restraint. And sparkling over still? A strategic play. He inhaled slightly. This was not merely dining. This was doctrine. He bowed. Then—almost imperceptibly—he allowed his gaze to drift sideways toward the other waiter. The one guarding the Bordeaux. A glance. A smirk. The other waiter straightened. War had been declared. Not loudly. Not crudely. But in that ancient, civilized way—through sequence, pairing, vintage, sourcing. "My customer," said the eyes of one, "commands depth." "My customer," replied the other, "commands precision." In the center of the room, the maître stood like a referee in an invisible duel. He felt it all. The tension. The pride. The escalating elegance. Two tables. Two sovereign appetites. Two waiters defending honor with corkscrews. Outside, pedestrians continued their ignorant procession past the windows. Inside, the gladiators sharpened their tasting notes. The pepper in the maître's bloodstream flared again—not from pain, but from exhilaration. Finally. A night worth surviving. The

kitchen became a cathedral. Not loud. Not chaotic. Sacred. Foie gras descended onto golden croutons with priestly precision. Oysters reclined on crushed ice like aristocrats on marble. The truffle soup—dark, perfumed, decadent—was sealed beneath its dome of puff pastry, brushed with egg wash that shone like polished armor. Across the line, the fumet of crustaceans reduced patiently, tightening into essence, into argument, into proof. Heat rose. Butter whispered. Knives moved with liturgical intent. This was not service. This was opera. For weeks—months—the brigade had endured mediocrity. Well-done steaks murdered beyond recognition. Risotto ordered without butter, without salt, without joy. Requests for substitutions that felt like vandalism. Tonight was different. Tonight, the gods of appetite had walked in through a street-level door. The maître stood at the pass, posture regained, eyes bright. The waiters hovered like altar boys in tailored black. Even the saucier straightened his spine. And then—without anyone giving permission—it began. A hum. Low at first. Almost accidental. Then fuller.

"*Bei figli dell'amore…*
Schiavi siam de' vezzi vostri;
Con un detto, un detto sol potete
Nostre pene, nostre pene consolar…"
The pastry chef joined in, voice surprisingly tender.
"*Vieni e senti de' nostro core*
Il frequente palpitar."
They were not thinking of lovers. They were thinking of proper orders. Of customers who knew. Of menus read not as lists, but as possibilities. The maître closed his eyes for a second. In his mind, the lions returned—not accusatory now, but approving. The hidden murder faded. The pepper retreated into anecdote. The dining room murmured beyond the swinging doors. Two tables. Two rival philosophies plated with precision. Inside the kitchen, children pressed against the glass of a candy shop window. Except they were the ones making the candy. And tonight, someone worthy was eating it. He approached his plate the way a court lady might approach a sealed letter—measured, composed, aware that the smallest gesture could alter history.

Knife angled precisely. Fork poised like punctuation. He broke the crust of the truffle soup en croûte with surgical grace. Steam rose in disciplined spirals. He inhaled. Not greedily. Intellectually. Across the room, she did not wait for ceremony. The oyster shell tilted decisively. The brine met her tongue like a coastline reclaimed. She did not nibble; she assessed. She did not sip; she consumed. The monkfish would not be admired. It would be conquered. He dissected. She devoured. Two faces of the same medal: refinement and ferocity. The waiter—his waiter—kept count in silence. Courses elapsed like rounds in a championship bout. Foie gras: elegant disappearance. Oysters: decisive annihilation. Soup: contemplative absorption. Fumet: reduction met with reduction. A glance passed between the two waiters. No words. Just narrowed eyes and discreet recalculations of pacing. “My customer,” said one internally, “possesses control.” “My customer,” answered the other inwardly, “possesses hunger.” The Château La Tour 1982 breathed slowly, appreciated in sips that bordered on philosophical.

The Crémant d'Alsace 2018 sparkled through her progression with sharp, strategic timing. In the center of it all, the maître stood trembling. Partly from the residual memory of pepper's betrayal. Partly from something else entirely. He saw it unfolding already. Not rivalry. Recognition. The way she glanced—once—at the precise incision of his pastry dome. The way he noticed—without turning his head—the decisive wrist with which she dispatched the last oyster. He imagined the future in absurd detail. Shared tables. Strategic wine selections. Debates about sauce reductions at midnight. Children who would never, under any circumstance, order well-done steak. His eyes shimmered. A waiter cleared a plate. Another set down the volaille en vessie, ceremonially slit open at table. The monkfish emerged from parchment in a plume of aromatic steam. The race intensified. Who would finish first? Who would finish better? The maître pressed a napkin discreetly to his eye. It was, he told himself, the pepper. But even as he said it, he knew— It was love. They rose almost simultaneously. Not abruptly.

Not theatrically. As if a silent metronome had ticked inside both of them. Bills arrived. Cards placed. Signatures executed with the calm authority of people accustomed to consequences. And then—the tips. Generous. Not ostentatious. But unmistakable. The kind of tip that says: You did not merely serve me. You understood me. The waiters collected the receipts and exchanged a look that said the duel had ended in honorable draw. Two Ubers appeared outside, summoned by separate gestures. Two doors opened. Two silhouettes entered different cars. Engines started. Headlights diverged. Yes. Different Ubers. But the maître knew. He knew. Those two were not separate trajectories. They were parallel lines waiting for a curve. He stood by the window—careful not to stand too visibly in the window, because dignity has angles—and watched the taillights recede in opposite directions. BELONGED. They belonged to a future together the way oil from olive taggiasche belongs over a salad of fresh artichokes. Not optional. Not decorative. Structural. And always— Always— a Pigato della

Riviera di Ponente with fresh artichokes. Always Pigato. Never anything else. Never a Sauvignon. Never a reckless Chardonnay. Pigato understands bitterness and does not panic. The maître pressed his palm lightly against the glass. He imagined their next encounter. Perhaps not here. Perhaps somewhere accidental. A gallery opening. A late-night bookshop. A vineyard where someone mispronounces "vermentino" and they both wince in unison. He could already see it. He wiped a tear. This time, unquestionably not the pepper. In the dining room behind him, plates were cleared. Candles lowered. The kitchen exhaled. Civilization had occurred tonight. And somewhere in the city, two strangers were riding through traffic, unaware that destiny had already paired their tasting menus.